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DE RUEHDG #0777/01 0622258
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 032258Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO
TO RUEHPU/AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE PRIORITY 4148
RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3855
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SANTO DOMINGO 000777

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DEPT FOR WHA, WHA/CAR

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [DR](#) [HA](#)

SUBJECT: HAITI'S PRESIDENT-ELECT WARMLY WELCOMED BY
DOMINICANS

¶1. Summary. The visit of Haitian President-elect Rene Preval to Santo Domingo has been a media success and a generally feel-good event, including the reinvigoration of the dormant Dominican-Haitian Binational Commission. The press carries little of substance from the busy 24-hour visit. Embassy expects a fuller readout next week from Haitian ambassador to Santo Domingo Fritz Cineas. End summary.

¶2. Haitian President-elect Rene Preval received an enthusiastic and full protocolar welcome for his March 2-3 visit to Santo Domingo. His busy schedule will stretch somewhat beyond the planned 24 hours, according to the Dominican presidential spokesman, as Preval and his delegation are adding meetings this afternoon, Friday.

¶3. Preval's delegation included Rene Momplaisir, John Joel Joseph, Consuelo Coicou (interpreter) and businessmen Bernard Craan and Philippe Armand. Haitian ambassador Fritz Cineas met them upon their arrival via private jet at Santo Domingo's Las Americas international airport, and the party transferred to a private helicopter for the flight to downtown Santo Domingo, escorted by two military helicopters. The delegation was based at the Hotel Santo Domingo, in close proximity to the Foreign Ministry, the Congress, and the Embassy of Haiti. The president-elect received full security protection, including the presence at the hotel of a black-garbed SWAT team, but there was in fact relatively little control over those who sought to attend hotel events.

¶4. Foreign Minister Carlos Morales Troncoso offered them lunch at the ministry and in the afternoon Preval received Haitian students at the hotel. The event began with the national hymns of both countries, and Preval invited "those of you who know the Dominican anthem" to sing along. Communication was in French and in Creole, and the atmosphere quickly relaxed. Bernard Craan related his experiences as a student in Madrid and assured students of opening opportunities in Haiti. A student spokesman listed the difficulties of life in the Dominican Republic, much as was done in their recent meeting with President Fernandez and Haitian ambassador Cineas. and added complaints about the inability of the Haitian authorities to assure security and educational opportunity at home. Preval sympathized and offered encouraging words, and the excited students offered him a round of applause. A more formal diplomatic reception took place immediately afterward, with a good turnout in relatively disorganized circumstances.

¶5. Preval proceeded to the palace for a photo op with Fernandez, in front of a portrait of Dominican independence hero Juan Pablo Duarte, and after an hour's meeting in the presidential office, the party attended a formal dinner offered by Fernandez and Vice-President Albuquerque. The Dominican side included FM Morales Troncoso, presidential

chief of staff Danilo Medina, Armed Forces Secretary Pared Perez, Interior Secretary Almeyda, Technical Secretary of the presidency Montas, Health Minister Rojas Gomez, Environment Secretary Max Puig, and Migration Director Amarente Baret.

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Ambassador to Haiti Serulle Ramia also attended.

¶6. On Friday, February 3, Preval called on former president Hipolito Mejia and the leadership of the opposition PRD. Following the hour-long meeting he commented that he was extremely lucky to have good friends both in the presidential palace and heading the opposition. He and his party were scheduled for a number of private meetings and a noontime press conference and departure, but the departure time has reportedly been pushed back to late afternoon.

A Very Public Event

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¶7. MFA Haitian affairs director Amb. Inocencio Garcia told political officer on March 2 that the Dominican authorities are "very happy" with the visit, as an opening to better communication and cooperation. Preval's "good will gesture" of a visit to Santo Domingo was much appreciated; he described one of his motives as "making amends" for the chaotic reception of Fernandez in Port-au-Prince on December ¶12.

¶8. The events had a very high public relations profile, but neither side had much of substance to share with the press. Preval's public comments were positive but anodyne: "My presence in the Dominican Republic is a demonstration of the interest of our two countries in marching together to find solutions for our common problems; it is highly significant that the Dominican Republic is the first country I am visiting after winning the election. This is a way of

telling you, President Fernandez, how convinced we are of our friendship." He reportedly invited Fernandez to the inauguration. Much was made of the fact that the presidential dinner served in effect as an initial meeting of a reinvigorated binational commission, an arrangement set up by the two but fallen into disuse during the Mejia years.

¶9. In the celebratory atmosphere, hard topics were easy to avoid. Foreign Minister Morales Troncos told journalists that the administration had not raised migration issues, for those would await the formation of a new government in Haiti. The FM spoke of "a friendly encounter to confirm friendship and solidarity." One newspaper headlined Morales' comment that he had spoken with the president-elect about the potential of generating employment in Haiti in connection the CAFTA-DR free trade agreement.

Comment

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¶10. Turning the elegant and affable Preval into something of a media star, the visit dramatized the high expectations of Dominicans and the administration's pleasure that it will have counterparts in Port au Prince. Haitian ambassador Fritz Cineas has agreed to give the Embassy a fuller read out next week. We would be surprised if he admits that there were any points of friction. Since he told the Ambassador in a courtesy call last month that his appointment had been cleared in advance with leading presidential candidates, Cineas will probably have a good deal of time to work on the less glossy aspects of the bilateral relationship.

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